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ABSTRACT

Second language learning research suggests the existence of a theoretical device (a monitor) that can examine an utterance for grammaticality and appropriateness. The monitor theory gives insight into the process that native language speakers follow in learning to write their own language. The monitor can be developed consciously (learning) or unconsciously (acquisition) just as various aspects of writing are developed unconsciously while other aspects are learned. Studies indicating that students who have writing experience and students who read a lot are better writers than are other students imply that a combination of learning and acquisition is at work in making a good writer. Good writers also tend to spend more time writing, rewriting, and rereading their essays than poorer writers, implying that they are referring to a monitoring device. The composition class should be a place for monitor-building (learning) and for acquisition as students become able to utilize both these channels on the path to production. (TJ)

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Learning and Acquisition: Two Paths to Writing*

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Each semester, as teachers of composition, we are faced with students whose production of the written language is extremely inadequate for most communicative purposes. Yet there are always some students who can write. I should like to suggest some theoretical explanations to account for the fact that some people are better able to communicate in writing than others. Only if we consider the factors that contribute to individual differences will we be able to identify what the issues in composition teaching really are. For we would all like to make our classrooms as effective as possible in fostering student improvement. To do that we must begin by trying to understand what learning is all about and how to foster its growth.

I shall be approaching the problem of individual variation from a perspective that does not focus on any of the important discussions modern rhetoricians are currently engaged in, but which focuses instead on some issues being investigated in the field of second language acquisition research. We find that several recent studies in adult second language acquisition suggest an organizing framework which is directly applicable to the native speaker learning to write his/her own language. An important point is that these insights from psycholinguistics have as their primary focus the description of the learner/writer not as someone who needs to be treated for deficiencies but as someone whose mental processes must be understood. Such a descriptive approach provides some cogent explanations to account for the differing performance of individual students and helps to generate research questions which will hopefully lead to the development of appropriate pedagogical methods and materials.

In the past three years, a new theory of second language learning has emerged which is known as "monitor theory," developed by Stephen D. Krashen.[1]

The two major features of the model posited by monitor theory which we shall be concerned with and which can be directly related to the acquisition of writing are (1) the distinction drawn between possible paths of internalizing certain language skills (learning vs. acquisition), and (2) the explanation for individual variation.

LEARNING VS. ACQUISITION

Let us first take a look at certain underlying psycholinguistic assumptions that monitor theory makes. Language is viewed as rule-governed behavior, but there are two ways in which this behavior becomes a part of any one individual's language performance. The first way is through acquisition, which Krashen defines as follows:

> The technical term language acquisition is used ...to refer to the way linguistic abilities are internalized "naturally," that is, without conscious focusing on linguistic forms. It appears to require, minimally, participation in natural communication situations....
> Language acquisition is a subconscious process.[2]

The primary example of acquisition is the way in which children gain knowledge of their first language, their mother tongue.

The second path to attaining a linguistic skill is, in contrast to acquisition, a conscious process which Krashen calls learning, and defines as follows:

> Language learning ...is a conscious process, and is the result of either a formal language learning situation or a self-study program. Formal learning situations are characterized by the presence of feedback or error correction, largely absent in acquisition environments, and "rule isolation," the presentation of artificial linguistic environments....[3]

There are many reasons to suppose that learning to write is in many ways more comparable to learning another language than it is to learning to

speak. Thus, a model for second language acquisition and learning may have something to say about learning to write.

Several other researchers have addressed the issues which the distinction between acquisition and learning captures. For example, Elaine Chaika makes the claim that learning to write is a language learning problem. She says "...telling students to 'talk on paper' misleads them. It falsely implies that writing is as easy and natural as talking, and patently, it is not."[4] In focusing on the problems of writing, Chaika is positing an explanation similar to the approach one of the major twentieth century psycholinguists, Lev Vygotsky, first articulated in the 1930's:

> In speaking [the child] is hardly conscious of the sounds he pronounces and quite unconscious of the mental operations he performs. In writing, he must take cognizance of the sound structure of each word, dissect it, and reproduce it in alphabetical symbols, which he must have studied and memorized before....Written language demands conscious work.[5]

The fact that writing differs from speaking in the important ways both Chaika and Vygotsky mention is further discussed by Janet Emig. In detailing the differences between speaking and writing, Emig notes, among other characteristics, that (1) writing is "learned" while talking is "natural"; (2) writing is"technological"; talking "organic"; and (3) most writing is slower than most talking.[6]

Such differences can be related to so-called first-order and second-order processes, which Emig explains: "First-order processes [talking and listening] are acquired without formal or systematic instruction; the second-order processes of reading and writing tend to be learned initially only with the aid of formal and systematic instruction."[7]

Thus, the word pairs conscious/learned and unconscious/acquired are critical in all of these discussions. Chaika, Vygotsky and Emig all use

one or more of these words in ways that parallel Krashen's definitions. The crucial point these comments have in common is the way in which conscious procedures are described as necessary factors in fostering writing skills. All three researchers point to the writer as someone who has an active and aware role in the writing process. But while they do assign a role to learning as a way of internalizing knowledge, they do not suggest ways in which unconscious processes - what Krashen is terming acquisition - can also be a factor in developing fluency in writing, a point I shall return to subsequently. What is important to consider is that these two ways of internalizing knowledge can both be seen as systems which allow access to information required to write successfully. We need to be asking ourselves whether our classroom procedures capitalize on this dual path to performance.

Writing is actually a complex task which requires the simultaneous control over a number of processes, all of which involve choices. Vygotsky pointed out that writing cannot occur without mastery of a writing system. This first skill - graphology - appears to follow a movement from "learning" it to internalizing it on a sub-conscious level. Such a transition appears to be possible for many sensori-motor skills, though not necessarily for other sorts of information. There is no evidence to support the idea that other choices in writing can go through the same stages of teach-learn-perform unconsciously. No matter how many parallels can be drawn, the totality of learning to write is not like the totality of learning to ride a bicycle. When we say our students don't know how to write, we are usually talking about people who have mastery over the alphabet, but who may or may not have mastery over middle-level areas (such as morphology and syntax), and who frequently lack the ability to handle macro-level rhetorical choices. In

fact, these various mastery levels are often used as an explanation to account for different student populations. The remedial student at one school might be placed in a regular freshman class at another.

Many programs in composition still concentrate on a skills approach. Failure to write well is seen as the absence of a particular skill which can be "taught" to students. This approach assumes that the problem can be remedied by a conscious rather than unconscious attention to issues in writing. We have, however, not yet begun to identify which level of choices in writing are subject to conscious inspection for rule adherence and which level of choices is best sorted out through unconscious "feel."

The monitor model proposes that language performers have in their linguistic data bank a theoretical device which can examine an utterance for grammaticality and appropriateness. Krashen posits that in second language production, the acquired system initiates production, and when conditions permit, the consciously learned system can intrude and alter the shape of an utterance, often before it actually is spoken or written down. It is therefore impossible to "monitor" what one does not know on some level.

In schematizing the writing process in terms consistent with the monitor model, the obligatory first stage (which initiates production) is the process of learning how to make marks on a page in a particular code. At the stage where the writer produces sentences of his or her own construction, these sentences will approximate standard written English in direct proportion to the writer's mastery over the morphosyntactic rules of the language. It is important to stress that such mastery can be conscious or unconscious, that is, mastery can stem from an acquired pro-

ficiency or a learned one. What does appear to be the case is that these sorts of features - the morphosyntactic "rules" - lend themselves to rule isolation and can be taught to students to form part of the monitor for those people who lack an acquired mastery system.

However, even the combination of "creative construction" and correct standard written English is not sufficient to produce that amorphous entity "good prose" without the addition of mastery over discourse level principles (rhetoric). Because discourse level principles are difficult to "chunk" and difficult to define, at this level a monitor of "grammaticality and appropriateness" (Krashen's terms) seems to have no role. I would like to suggest that a combination of conscious and unconscious knowledge combines to form a kind of discourse monitor, which is closely related to editing. My use of the term "monitor" here is meant to refer to a theoretical overseer which looks at the message and adjusts it appropriately without necessarily appealing to a specific "rule" to do so.

Before pursuing the implications of the model, let us first look at the second aspect of the monitor model which merits our attention, namely the explanation it provides for variation in individual performance.

INDIVIDUAL VARIATION

Anyone with any teaching experience has come across obviously intelligent students who evidence control over standard written English, and equally intelligent students who are dysfunctional writers. Such is also the case in second language situations where fluency is by no means uniform for apparently "matched" populations of students.

Studies have shown that successful L2 performers have developed useful and effective moritoring techniques, whereas non-successful performers have

not. Various case studies of adult second language learners seem to support the hypothesis that there are three types of monitor users: overusers, underusers, and optimal users.[8] Overusers, who monitor all the time, are characterized by hesitancy in their speech and attention to form when writing. At the other extreme are underusers, who seem to have an aggressive personality type, and who focus on content and communication when speaking. Optimal monitor users edit their L2 output when it does not interfere with communication. Such editing results in variable performance, that is, different types and numbers of errors occur under different conditions.

A close look at successful and unsuccessful writers can provide further insights into individual variation.

A study of 927 freshmen at the University of Miami by John Woodward and Arthur Phillips ranked the sample based on grades received in the previous semester's writing course.[9] They found that students who were not required to write any themes in their high school English classes ranked more frequently than expected in the "poor" category, and the same was true for those students who reported not being required to read any books aside from textbooks during their senior year in high school.

This study would seem to suport the conclusion that a combination of learning (e.g. previous high school training in writing) and acquisition (e.g. reading) will lead to success in freshman English. In a later study focusing on the in-process behavior of good writers, Charles Stallard examined 15 high school seniors who scored highest on a standard essay test compared to a random sample of 15 who had not scored high.[10] He found that good students consistently spent more time writing and more time pre-writing. The good writers also made significantly more revisions on both the word

and paragraph level. Another behavioral difference noted was the number of times the good writers stopped and re-read parts of their essay or made changes, whereas the random sample members rarely stopped at any point in their writing to contemplate what they had written.

If we consider the concept of monitoring here, it appears that good students more often "appeal" to some sort of monitoring device by taking the time to consider their product and allowing a conscious examination of what they have written down in a "free" sort of situation. But what is it that allows a student to make the changes that Stallard points to? What passes through these students' heads as they contemplate and then change their product?

Earlier I suggested the existence of a discourse level monitor. What appears to be happening in the student's conscious examination is an attempt to sort out what is working from what isn't working in a particular piece of prose. To call this process "editing" is to lump together several behaviors into one category. Purely morphosyntactic changes, for example, can result from an appeal to a learned rule which the student has stored in memory. For other students, the "rules" have probably been acquired, and a slip of the pen is corrected by a recognition of an error through a "feel" approach in which it would be inaccurate to point to a rule as a mediating force.

However, Stallard's subjects made changes in macro-level or discourse areas as well. The writing behavior of these students would seem to point to a kind of violation sign flashing in their heads. This "uh-oh" can be triggered by a conscious recognition of having broken or ignored a particular dictum[11] or can be triggered by a vaguer feeling that something is somehow

wrong. What is crucial is that even this latter type of recognition has to be conscious or the student would not have stopped to make changes, just as was seen in the behavior of Stallard's random sample.

Such a behavioral pattern is supported in a recent study by Richard Beach on extensive revisers vs. non-revisers.[12] What he found shows that revisers, like optimal monitor users, know when and where and how to use the full resources of learned and acquired systems, while non-revisers have few or no intuitions about the possible uses of monitoring for either form or content:

> ...the extensive revisers conceived of revising as involving substantive changes in content and form; conceived of free-writing as highly tentative; abstracted key points that served as a blueprint for predicting development in later drafts; and detached themselves from their writing. Nonrevisers conceived of revising as involving minor changes in form; conceived of their free-writing as needing little further development; rarely predicted changes for subsequent drafts; and were often unwilling to criticize themselves. [13]

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The psycholinguistic model we have been discussing suggests that language performance results from a combination of learned and acquired systems. While children have an innate capacity to acquire spoken fluency in their native tongue, all evidence seems to suggest that there is no parallel innate capacity to express oneself in acceptable written form.

The composition teacher has traditionally followed the approach of devoting his or her attentions to what appeared most teachable - resulting in an emphasis on editing skills and algorithms for form. But too many of the skills required for writing are not "skills" at all - they are creative processes which must be acquired if they are to truly be in the student's control.

First language acquisition research demonstrates that children acquire language more by interacting with it than by imitating it. Some of the qualities of "motherese" can be transferred to the writing classroom situation. The workshop approach is one method that directly encourages acquisition; the small group interaction gets the student to focus on generating ideas, clarifying points, and reaching an audience rather than focusing on adhering to rules that may block creativity. In addition, since studies have shown a correlation between reading and writing, reading for the purpose of "immersion" in the language rather than for imitation or for launching discussions appears to be another highly recommended activity to stimulate acquisition.

While it may be that students who exhibit faulty syntax, as Chaika mentioned, have "gaps in their knowledge," other types of gaps resulting in faulty form are harder to plug with discrete point rule isolation.

If we accept the division of writing into micro and macro level concerns, we can see that both levels offer a role to a monitoring device. On the micro level, the mechanics of English can become stored in memory and consulted to check form. (Learning to use a good handbook can cut down on memory overload.) On the macro-level, the monitor can watch over such discourse level issues as whether or not the argument is proceeding logically, whether the transitions have given the correct signposts to the reader, whether the essay is coherent. Such a monitor seems to allow some students to compare the product of their writing in a gestalt kind of method to some mental approximation of the norm for standard written English. But there are other students who have no mental approximation

of this norm. Learning alone ("monitoring") does not appear successful with this population, and increased acquisition becomes crucial.

In summary, what the monitor model has to tell composition teachers is that students can be helped. What we need to concern ourselves with is making the classroom a place for both "monitor - building" (learning) and for acquisition. The writer in the process of writing needs to maximally utilize both these channels on the path to production.

NOTES

[1]Of many articles and presentations, see particularly Stephen D. Krashen, "A Model of Adult Second Language Performance," Paper presented at the Linguistics Society of America, December 1975; and Stephen D. Krashen, "The Monitor Model for Adult Second Language Performance," in M. Burt, H. Dulay, and M. Finocchiaro (eds.), Viewpoints on English as a Second Language (New York: Regents Publishing Co., 1977),pp.152-161.

[2]Krashen, "The Monitor Model," pp.152-153.

[3]Ibid.,p.153.

[4]Elaine Chaika, "Who Can Be Taught?" reprinted in Richard Ohmann and W.B. Coley (eds.), Ideas for English 101 (Urbana, Ill.:NCTE,1975), p.189.

[5]Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language, ed. and trans. E. Hanfmann and G. Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962), p.99. My italics.

[6]Janet Emig, "Writing As a Mode of Learning," College Composition and Communication, 28 (May 1977), 123-124.

[7]Ibid., p.122. My italics.

[8]See Stephen D. Krashen, "Individual Variation in the Use of the Monitor," in W. Ritchie (ed.), Principles of Second Language Learning and Teaching (New York: Academic Press, in press).

[9]John C. Woodward and Arthur G. Phillips, "Profile of the Poor Writer," Research in the Teaching of English, 1 (1967),41-53.

[10]Charles K. Stallard, "An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, 8 (1974),206-218.

[11]I have chosen the word "dictum" because what I am referring to are closer to descriptive norms (e.g. transitions help) than to prescriptive rules (e.g. initial "not only" requires inversion).

[12]Richard Beach, "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Nonrevisers," College Composition and Communication, 27 (May 1976), 160-164.

[13]Ibid.,p.164.